

On Being Grounded: Perspectives from the New York Foundation

Kevin Ryan, Adriana Rocha, and Maria Mottola
The New York Foundation

Looking out the window from the New York Foundation's office in the Empire State Building is like standing on the bow of a ship, seeing instead of water, a tranquil sea of cement and steel. It's a different story on the ground, which is teeming with people and noise. Whether you perceive the city from above or below, its scale is overwhelming. New York is home to 8 million people, more than twice the number of people than the next largest U.S. city. More than a third of New Yorkers were born outside the United States and come from all over the world. Practicing local philanthropy in a place so dynamic and diverse is a humbling experience.

Author Russell Shorto describes New York's unique character this way: "It has something to do with the racial and ethnic tangle. It has to do with talk, chatter, tension, strife, street fighting, barrios, gangs, bosses, bare knuckles. It has to do with the scrum of ideas. It has to do with a certain density of souls, with vertical living, with the inherent limitations of an island, its shoreline functioning like the rim of a pot." How, in a place so multilayered and diverse, can a small foundation have impact?

From the beginning, the trustees of the New York Foundation had a healthy sense of the foundation's limitations, and they were comparatively modest in their assessment of what a local foundation like ours could achieve in a city the size of New York. The first trustees were venture capitalists of the early 1900s who talked about philanthropy in those terms, long before it was popular to do so. "On the frontiers of public service, there are experiments and opportunities which need funds but cannot obtain them from routine philanthropy or government. These experiments may fail. They are not yet understood, or perhaps even approved, by established institutions."

While today, venture philanthropy implies a willingness to take risks, in practice that approach looks for “measurable return on a civic investment” and requires a potential grantee to meet strict benchmarks to qualify for grants. Our early trustees meant something very different. “Philanthropic foundations cannot begin to solve single-handedly the numerous social problems that face us,” the trustees stated in a 1947 report. “They can, however, provide much of the seed money with which these problems can be made the concern and responsibility of the public at large.” Recognizing that a small foundation could have the flexibility to get in early at the point the risk was greatest, they wanted to get resources to problems before they were even acknowledged as such.

Several years ago, NCRP helped the New York Foundation evaluate our grantmaking. Of course, like many others, we started by asking: What does our grantmaking add up to? We came to realize that we were looking in the wrong places for evidence of impact. We were looking at problems of enormous scale and then asking questions about our relevance in comparison. What happens when a foundation interested in getting at root causes of social injustice is working with a toothbrush when what is needed is a steam shovel? We had to match the tools we had available to us to the scale of work to be done in order to understand where we fit in. We found that our relevance was in supporting small community-based organizations at their earliest stages, enabling their constituents to gain a say over what was happening in their lives.

In writing this article, we set out to look at a few recent policy changes here in New York City and trace them back to where they started. How did changes happen? Who were the players involved? What does the work feel like on the ground? What would policymakers say about the role of local groups? What would organizers and constituents say about the role foundations play? Interviews with colleagues, organizers, policymakers, and constituents offered us some insights into these questions.

“If two or three people are hollering, it doesn’t do anything, but when we can take up half of City Hall, then there’s a seriousness.”

New York City’s child welfare system has seen dramatic changes over the last 10 years. Removals of children from their families have declined by close to 50 percent. Referrals for services to prevent placement of children in foster care are up by 25 percent, and the city has made neighborhood-based services a centerpiece of its reform efforts. While no one could identify just one thing responsible for these changes, everyone agreed that parents played a major role in shifting the agency’s focus from placement to prevention. Parents whose children are taken into foster care have long fought the system in which the parents are marginalized and criminalized. As one parent said, “I still deserve respect whether or not I did something wrong.”

Without exception, the parents to whom we spoke traced their initial involvement to needing to help themselves and resolve their own immediate crisis. One parent we spoke with sought out things that could help build her record and influence the judge to help get her children back. As she battled the family court system, she learned her legal rights—exactly what she needed at that time. By then, her children had been in three different foster care placements, and it was doubly important for her to learn what she needed to do to get them back.

All the parents we interviewed began, at some crucial point, to focus less on their own problems and more on the broader issues affecting all parents with children in care. “I had to see it for myself, and once it worked for me, I saw it could work for others,” said one parent. Changes came slowly as parents with children in foster care began demanding reforms collectively. Parents came together to share problems and discuss

what was happening in their child welfare case. “Parents need a place to air their frustrations. Anger will only make things worse,” one parent said.

Today, parents have won more of a say in how the welfare system should work. Organizations such as People United for Children, Concerned Citizens for Family Preservation, and the Child Welfare Organizing Project attract parents who are ready to play a more active role in changing the system and examine how things got this way in the first place. Parents become trained advocates, and help others navigate and make demands for more parent advocates, better visitation and increased services to keep families together. They have fought successfully to get officials to recognize housing as a barrier to children returning to their birth parents and to require the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) to provide materials to parents about their rights as soon as the child is placed in foster care. In December 2005, the New York City Council voted unanimously to establish a Parent Advisory Committee at ACS, a huge win for parents.

When asked what tools are most effective in influencing policymakers, parents cited having knowledge of their rights and how the system works. “People have to know I’m not just talking to be talking,” one parent said. Policy people and elected officials “talk up here, they speak a different language.” When they give you information, “It’s like they are sharing a secret with you.” Armed with credible information, parents have leverage. Parents took over a local councilman’s office, filling it with neighborhood residents whose children were in foster care. “This problem is in your district,” said one parent. “It mattered that we brought him face to face with the facts.” The parents also brought numbers showing that the councilman’s district was hardest hit. “These are people who want to come out and vote for you,” the councilman was told.

Naturally, different organizations have different approaches, making it hard for funders to sort out what role each group plays. As funders, we worry about fragmentation of effort, but maybe the problem is scarcity of resources and not careless strategy on the part of groups seeking change. As David Tobis at the Child Welfare Fund observed, “It is important to have groups that are screaming, demonstrating, making trouble on the outskirts of the fray, as well as to have moderate groups in the center of things, discussing, cooperating or collaborating with the establishment, working to implement the changes that have been fought for. In child welfare, groups of disenfranchised people, speaking for themselves, united, unruly, articulate, demanding, have been one of the decisive forces for change over the past 10 years. A second source of power is information: to expose, embarrass, educate. To unite these two sources of power “is a winning combination.”

It didn’t even make sense to raise the question of scale with these parents. For low-income people of color in New York City, the child welfare system is ever present in their lives and communities. “I was most surprised to realize that I did not stand alone,” said one parent. “It’s happening to the poorest of us—blacks and Hispanics.” For parent leaders, racism and classism are deep at the root of this problem.

For the parents with whom we spoke, the fight is worth waging. “Sometimes hitting your head against the wall hurts—you get a big knot on your forehead, but maybe over time, the bricks do get looser,” said one parent. One parent mentioned how important it was for her children to see them doing this work: “I tell them, ‘Look, it was about “us” at one

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time, but now it's something bigger. This is not about us anymore—we've had our time—now this is about all of us.”

While our foundation's guidelines do not have an explicit focus on child welfare, we look for organizations that engage people directly in solving community problems. A benefit of not being tied to specific issue areas is that we can be responsive in real time as concerns emerge from the communities themselves. This proved to be the case when, in the mid-1990s, we began to see proposals from several groups initiated by parents whose families were caught up in the child welfare system. Our early funding to new efforts can act as recognition for groups that have not, up until that point, had much of a public hearing.

In contrast to our broad approach, our colleagues at the Child Welfare Fund have an explicit focus on reforming the child welfare system. Their strategic focus on one issue and willingness to support organizing, advocacy and policy work has been critical in changing New York City's system. This argues for a multiplicity of tactics on the funders' side as well as the grantees' side.

“We had to understand the legislative process, bring others to the work—this is how the coalition came together.”

Street vending has become an important source of income in New York City for many immigrants. They are not eligible for government assistance, manufacturing jobs are shrinking, and the economic climate makes it difficult to find work. It is not an easy way for anyone to earn a living, but undocumented immigrant vendors have faced particular problems because they are unable to comply with the requirements of current law. Also, the number of street vendor licenses in New York City is extremely limited; the waiting list for a general vendor's license is so long that it could take 25 years to receive a license. In addition to being arrested and given summonses when found, vendors report they have been harassed and illegally searched by police officers. Often vendors' merchandise is confiscated and thrown in the garbage, and any cash found on them is taken away.

Street vendors in New York City won a battle last year to lift the requirement that non-U.S. citizen applicants for licenses had to show proof that they were authorized to work by the federal immigration agency. Grassroots organizations, including the Latin American Workers Project and Esperanza del Barrio, as well as voluntary organizations representing African and Chinese members, mobilized street vendors to visit local officials to demand changes, and in June 2005, the City Council enacted the Equal Access to Vending Law, which was signed by the mayor in July. This was the culmination of a longer campaign in which several organizations with active street vendor members agreed to coordinate their efforts, enabling them to mobilize vendors in larger numbers and more strategically. By all accounts, they were effective.

“Sixty vendors came to us due to police abuse against them,” an organizer in Bushwick said describing early meetings. “We met every Tuesday night, and pretty soon we had

200 vendors that came via word of mouth and other vendors reaching out to them.” Strong leadership in the beginning helped. One vendor brought 17 vendors to the first meeting, and at the next meeting showed up with 40 vendors. Base building was hard work—unlicensed vendors work in a variety of neighborhoods, and represent a diverse group racially, ethnically, and linguistically. Early press coverage helped, and vendors spread the word among themselves.

Like the parents we interviewed, the street vendors initially came together because they wanted to address an immediate crisis: Numerous run-ins with the police made it impossible for them to earn a living. It took a long time to get the vendors to step back from their urgent need and focus on a broader campaign: to increase licenses. Armed with documentation of police abuse, vendors visited precincts and held accountability meetings. They secured support from sympathetic insiders like the Latino Officers Association and conducted a meeting at One Police Plaza on abuse of vendors.

As they made inroads with the police, vendors began to work with lawyers at a New York University School of Law’s Immigrant Rights Clinic to draft legislation on licensing. Leaders felt it was key to involve the vendors themselves in the process of crafting the language of the proposed bill. Said one leader: “People new to the coalition understood that vendors had been a part of drafting the legislation. That is how we got buy-in from vendors new to the process.” One attorney observed, “It also made a difference to legislators to see and meet the vendors,” adding that the legislators saw that the vendors wanted to be part of the vending system.

Striking a balance between alleviating the crisis at hand and winning long-term changes is not easy. “We had to address the immediate needs of the vendors, so they would continue to work with us on the longer-term goal of the license work,” said an organizer. It’s not a simple transition to achieve, but it matters. One veteran organizer said that “trained leaders and a willingness to go beyond narrow self-interest” were among his most critical organizing tools. The parents we interviewed agreed. Said one parent: “We are only seen as credible when we present not just one person’s problem, but things we hear over and over—that makes it an issue.” Choosing issues that link immediate concerns with large-scale change is also key. Another organizer who organizes parents for public school reform described drawing in local parents around the issue of teacher retention and, over time, building momentum and organizing hundreds to win reforms that included a systemwide program to link more experienced teachers with new recruits.

When foundations look for groups that are “working to scale” and achieving great impact, they sometimes miss groups at this earlier stage of their work, when involving people in tackling larger problems requires responding to their immediate needs. There’s no doubt that it is impressive to attend a site visit and see hundreds of people mobilized around an important issue. But there’s something to be said for providing support during the more laborious stage of building a base of constituents person by person, watching leaders emerge, and recognizing the potential of their collective effort over time. This is not just sentimental; it’s the hardest and most critical part of grassroots work if organizations truly want to represent the communities they serve.

“We believed that we could work in good faith with the government agencies to address tenants’ needs.”

In 2000, newspaper headlines reported a complex scam involving housing fraud and municipal neglect. The 203(k) loan program, administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), was intended to foster home ownership and affordable housing in low-income neighborhoods. Instead, it allowed unscrupulous real estate speculators to purchase buildings that bilked HUD out of millions of dollars. In one

version of the scam, a real estate speculator finds novice nonprofit housing developers who were approved by HUD to participate in the 203(k) program and connects them with a mortgage bank and appraiser. The real estate speculator then buys a dilapidated building at a low cost and within a day sells the same property to the nonprofit at a huge markup, pocketing the difference. The nonprofit would be left with an overvalued property and little money to rehabilitate the property.

Tenants who lived in these buildings were left without heat, hot water, or repairs, and had no one to turn to because they could not determine who owned the building. In New York City alone, this scam involved hundreds of buildings in Harlem, Bushwick, and Bedford-Stuyvesant. In Harlem, there were 294 buildings with more than 500 tenants who lived in uninhabitable apartments and faced eviction. No one would take responsibility for a program that had gone terribly awry.

Grassroots Funding & the New York Foundation

Some of the initiatives the New York Foundation has funded:

The **Latin American Workers Project** set out in 1997 to empower and develop member leaders who collectively address the problems and fears immigrant workers face in the workplace due to abuse and exploitation. Members participate in challenging institutional conditions of abuse and exploitation and develop individual plans and strategies for better wages, better working conditions, and civil rights.

Esperanza del Barrio was founded by a group of five Latina women ready to organize to create positive change both in their lives and in their community. In addition to community organizing campaigns, Esperanza now offers a youth group, children's tutoring, legal representation and advice, and workshops on job skills, leadership development, health, and domestic violence.

People United for Children (PUC) has worked since 1992 on behalf of low-income children and families in New York City. PUC assists parents dealing with the foster care and penal systems and works for systemic change. They also educate the public about the conditions facing and the policies affecting incarcerated children.

Concerned Citizens for Family Preservation (CCFP) links parents and institutions with the goal of reuniting families. It addresses the needs of children who have been placed in foster care and their families. CCFP's purpose is to prevent children in low-income working class and immigrant communities from entering the child welfare system. CCFP advocates for families of children in the system by helping them navigate the bureaucracy and exercise their rights.

The **Child Welfare Organizing Project** (CWOP) is a parent and professional partnership dedicated to public child welfare reform in New York City through increased, meaningful parent involvement in service and policy planning. Parents who have had direct, personal experience with the system now hold seats on advisory groups, work on the NY State Office of Children and Family Services' Program Improvement Plan, and guest lecture at virtually every area school of law and social work.

As early as 1998, some HUD tenants in Harlem became aware of the issue when tenants at 58 Edgecombe Avenue were forced out by the city, their apartments were gutted, and, contrary to what they had been promised, they were not allowed to return even when the rehabilitation was complete. "It took us two years to figure out what was happening," said one tenant. When tenants exhausted their attempts to obtain information about the plans for the 203(k) buildings from the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) and HUD, they filed a Freedom of Information Act request. While waiting for the results of their request, they crashed an HPD meeting for developers who were interesting in buying the 203(k) buildings to ask questions about the displacement of 203(k) tenants, arguing that tenants should be allowed to choose what changes they wanted for their buildings. After the meeting, HPD asked the group to bring 203(k) tenants together to discuss their plan for the buildings. Through their negotiations, tenants were able to convince HPD that the residents of the 203(k) buildings should be given options for the development of their buildings. In 2002, the first 17 buildings developed by nonprofit organizations allowed the tenants to opt for either a limited-equity co-op or a mutual housing association model.

The initial agreement that the tenants struck with HPD was a substantial victory. Winning involved organizing 60 tenant associations with a total of 350 members. Harlem Operation Take Back (HOTB), a community project initiated and controlled by the 203(k) tenants, received legal and organizing help from Goddard Riverside's West Side SRO Law Project. Tenants had to pore through the complexities of the 203(k) program, learning how to analyze city housing policies and articulate their position to city officials. They were able to gain the support of the local community board in their negotiations with HPD as well as the endorsement of Harlem's federal, state, and city elected officials.

Unfortunately, follow-up on the agreement—which was verbal, not written—would prove difficult. One tenant said, “We thought we would be relocated, the repairs would be made, and we would be able to return to our apartments in a reasonable amount of time.” Unfortunately, in the two and a half years since their agreement with HUD and HPD, the tenants have not received repairs to their apartments. “We felt that we had an agreement. We would have pushed a different strategy had we realized that government would be so unresponsive.” Only 25 percent of the buildings were being developed by nonprofits and HUD was evicting people, buying out tenants and emptying buildings by relocating tenants to buildings that were in disrepair—all without notifying tenant advocates.

Housing agencies and developers did not expect tenants to respond and fight back, but they did. Tenants have been meeting with the agencies to get them to honor their original commitment to repairs, allowing them to have input over the rehab, and allowing all of the tenants to return to their buildings. Keeping the lines of communication open with HUD and HPD staff is key, but they must also build legislative support, develop a media campaign, and connect these issues to the national public housing debate. Still, tenant leaders said, “The longer the process takes, the more people will get displaced or frustrated.” It was hard to get tenants involved in the campaign until displacement became a reality for them. This story is still unfolding.

Setting a local issue in its broader context is important if a group wants to win policy change. A former New York City commissioner described it this way: “It’s important to remember that policymakers are constantly ... dealing with the issue of the moment. Grassroots groups need to be able to contextualize their issues within a larger framework, particularly when it appears to be a micro issue affecting a neighborhood or a community,” to get appropriate attention from city, state or federal legislators.

This “larger framework” was evident to all of the parents, tenants and street vendors we spoke with, even in conversation about their most private and immediate concerns. When funders step too far back, we can’t see anymore how these “issues of the moment” connect to big picture issues, and we get frustrated that our grantees are not being paid attention to. Maybe we’re spending our time in the wrong places. If most of our intelligence comes from funder briefings, conferences and journals, we are missing something vital: engaging in direct conversations with grantees and their constituents about the context in which they do their work. Our foundation does this by holding regular site visits between trustees and grantees in neighborhoods we fund as well as retreats that bring foundation stakeholders together for deeper conversation. Only by listening and stepping out of our own narrow context can we know what’s happening in the city and what challenges the groups that we support face.

In all our conversations with tenants, parents, vendors, policymakers and organizers, themes emerged, and by listening to their stories, we learned things about the complexity and value of supporting local work.

Grassroots groups move people to action and harness their power to impact policy change.

“It’s local groups that raise an issue with policymakers, an issue that eventually becomes that heart of important legislation,” a former city commissioner told us. “A group can synthesize patterns within a community in a way that even a city or state official’s district office may not be able to do. They can detect a pattern of problems that need a policy fix.” Many of the policymakers we spoke with said that local groups, with active constituencies of community residents, can and do influence policy change in significant ways. One organizer described his group’s role as “confronting targets and people who make decisions with our power as an organization and with our leaders who communicate the issue and policy change we want.”

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Another commissioner gave credit for his agency's changes directly to grassroots groups that brought their concerns to the table. In an address to parent leaders, he said, "This system has fundamentally changed over the last several years. And it has changed because you have forced us to change, changed because you said openly and loudly, 'Things cannot continue to go the way they have been going.' And we listened to that."

The work can be messy and unpredictable but worth the risk.

Groups need room to experiment, and that may mean acknowledging missteps and shifting tactics. Maybe one of the problems foundations face is that we idealize grassroots organizations and become disappointed and disillusioned when upon closer look, things get messy. There's a tendency to anoint local heroes and create expectations that can't possibly be realized by normal human beings. This approach to funding, "allowing a degree of unpredictability," does not always mesh well with approaches that require defined benchmarks and measurable outcomes, which of course is not to say that impact is not relevant. Our own experience has been that grantees are first and foremost concerned with whether they are gaining or losing ground. Building a strong constituency base depends on it. As one organizer said, "People won't stay involved in an effort that's not getting anywhere."

Local funding is most effective when it is flexible and responsive and not overly prescriptive.

The New York Foundation's founding trustees recognized that they were choosing an approach that carried more ambiguity. In 1947, they wrote: "It might have been possible to devote a major portion of the funds to building up a single project, or at best a highly concentrated program in one field, with an impressive physical structure and public reputation. Too often such structures become monuments, static concepts in which the zest for experiment and progress is lost." Our trustees have never wanted to limit their grantmaking to a few issue areas, but have always focused around a range of local concerns. Rather than deciding from up here what the compelling issues are, organizations approach us directly, and we can react quickly as problems emerge. It requires conceding some amount of control on the foundation's part and accepting the limitations of what problems money alone can solve.

While it is important to be thoughtful about what you do, what is the appropriate amount of time and resources that should be devoted to self-examination? "Today, foundations seem to be spending even more money on themselves: their own studies, strategic planning processes, conferences and other insider activities," one organizer we interviewed reflected. "Life is short," he cautioned. Outlining a blueprint for how to do your work is the responsibility of any effective organization, but not when the process itself keeps you from getting things done or, worse, disengages the institution from what's happening around them.

In NCRP's *State of Philanthropy 2004*, William Schambra outlines the tendency of foundations to dismiss small grassroots groups as "parochial, unworthy of support by large sophisticated foundations that alone process the expertise required to design effective social interventions." Smaller grassroots groups are considered on the sidelines in the arena of effective social justice work by many of our colleagues. We think it depends on where you're standing.

We asked parents, street vendors and tenants what they would really tell foundations, given the chance. They talked about wanting to be recognized and respected: Communities need to be supported directly, they told us. Further, they said funders need to know that people have a sense of pride in themselves and in their community. Another policymaker admitted that, early on, she was not aware of the structures supporting the constituency groups she heard from and to which she responded. Later, she began to think of the funders "like the Wizard of Oz, hiding behind the curtain." It reminds us that, in some ways, our significance is illusory, exaggerated.

The real action is happening someplace else.

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